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THE SENSE OF PROPORTIONS

It happens to us very often, in observing the confusion that reigns in our epoch in all domains, to insist on the necessity, in order to escape it, of knowing how to put everything in its place, that is to say, to situate it exactly in relation to the others, according to its own nature and importance. This is indeed what most of our contemporaries no longer know how to do, and this is because they no longer have the notion of any true hierarchy; this notion, which is in a way at the base of every traditional civilization, is, for that very reason, one of those which the forces of subversion—whose action has produced what is called the modern spirit—have more especially set themselves to destroy.

Thus mental disorder is everywhere today, even among those who call themselves "traditionalists" (and moreover we have already shown how insufficient what this word implies is for reacting effectively against such a state of things); the sense of proportions, in particular, is strangely lacking, to such a point that one commonly sees not only what is most contingent or even most insignificant taken for the essential, but also the normal and the abnormal, the legitimate and the illegitimate, placed on a footing of equality, as if the one and the other were, so to speak, equivalent and had the same right to existence.

A fairly characteristic example of this state of mind is furnished to us by a "neo-Thomist" philosopher[1] who, in a recent article, declares that, in "civilizations of the sacred type" (we would say traditional), such as Islamic civilization or medieval Christian civilization, "the notion of holy war could have a meaning," but that it "loses all significance" in

1 To be precise, in order to avoid any ambiguity or contestation, we specify that, by using the expression "neo-Thomism," we intend to designate by it an attempt at "adaptation" of Thomism, which does not occur without rather serious concessions to modern ideas, by which even those who willingly proclaim themselves "anti-modern" are sometimes affected much more than one might believe; our epoch is full of similar contradictions.

“civilizations of the profane type” such as that of today, “where the temporal, more perfectly differentiated from the spiritual and henceforth fully autonomous, no longer has an instrumental role with regard to the sacred.”

Does not this way of expressing oneself seem to indicate that one is not far, at bottom, from seeing there a “progress,” or that, at the very least, one considers that this is something definitively acquired and on which “henceforth” there is no longer any reason to return? We would moreover like to be cited at least one other example of “civilizations of the profane type,” for our part we do not know a single one outside modern civilization, which, precisely because it is such, properly represents only an anomaly; the plural seems to have been put there expressly to allow a parallelism to be established, or, as we were saying earlier, an equivalence, between this “profane type” and the “sacred type” or traditional type, which is that of every normal civilization without exception.

It goes without saying that, if it were only a matter of the simple observation of a state of fact, this would give rise to no objection; but from this observation to the acceptance of this state as constituting a legitimate form of civilization on the same level as that of which it is the negation, there is truly an abyss. That one should say that the notion of “holy war” is inapplicable in present circumstances is a fact too evident for anyone not to agree with it; but one must not say for that reason that this notion no longer has any meaning, for the intrinsic value of an idea, and especially of a traditional idea such as this one, is entirely independent of contingencies and has not the least relation to what is called “historical reality”; it belongs to an entirely different order of reality.

To make the value of an idea—that is to say, in sum, its very truth (for, once it is a question of an idea, we do not see what its value could be otherwise)—depend on the vicissitudes of human events, that is precisely the characteristic of that “historicism” whose error we have denounced on other occasions, and which is only one of the forms of

modern “relativism”; that a “traditionalist” philosopher should share this way of seeing is something that is indeed most unfortunately significant!

And if he accepts the profane point of view as just as valid as the traditional point of view, instead of seeing in it only the degeneration or deviation which it is in reality, what could he possibly still find to object to in that all-too-famous “tolerance,” an attitude quite specifically modern and profane as well, and which consists, as is known, in granting to any error the same rights as to truth?

We have dwelt at some length on this example, because it is truly very representative of a certain mentality; but of course one could easily find a great number of others, in an order of ideas more or less close to this one. To the same tendencies is ultimately connected the undue importance attributed to the profane sciences by the more or less authorized (but in any case very poorly qualified) representatives of traditional doctrines, going so far as constantly to strive to “accommodate” these doctrines to the more or less hypothetical and always provisional results of those sciences, as if there could be a common measure between the one and the other, and as if they were things situated on the same level.

Such an attitude, whose weakness is particularly evident in “religious apologetics,” shows, in those who believe they must adopt it, a very strange ignorance of the value—we would readily say of the dignity—of the doctrines they imagine they are defending in this way, whereas they do nothing but lower and diminish them; and they are thus imperceptibly and unconsciously led into the worst compromises, plunging headlong into the trap set for them by those who aim only to destroy everything that has a traditional character, and who, for their part, know very well what they are doing by bringing them onto this ground of vain profane discussion.

It is only by maintaining in an absolute manner the transcendence of tradition that one renders it (or rather keeps it) inaccessible to any attack by its enemies, whom one should never consent to treat as

“adversaries”; but, for lack of a sense of proportions and hierarchy, who still understands this today?

We have just spoken of the concessions made to the scientific point of view, in the sense in which the modern world understands it; but the too frequent illusions regarding the value and scope of the philosophical point of view also imply an error of perspective of the same kind, since this point of view, by definition itself, is no less profane than the other. One should be able to content oneself with smiling at the pretensions of those who want to place purely human “systems,” products of simple individual thought, in parallel or in opposition with traditional doctrines, which are essentially supra-human, if they did not succeed all too often, in many cases, in having these pretensions taken seriously.

If the consequences are perhaps less grave, this is only because philosophy has, on the general mentality of our epoch, a more limited influence than that of profane science; but nevertheless, here again, one would be quite wrong, because the danger does not appear as immediately, to conclude that it is nonexistent or negligible. Moreover, even if there were no other result in this regard than to “neutralize” the efforts of many “traditionalists” by leading them astray into a domain from which there is no real profit to be drawn with a view to a restoration of the traditional spirit, this is always so much gained for the enemy; the reflections we have already made on another occasion, concerning certain illusions of a political or social order, would also find their application in such a case.

From this philosophical point of view, it even happens sometimes—let us say so in passing—that things take on a rather amusing turn: we mean the “reactions” of certain “disputants” of this sort, when they find themselves by some extraordinary chance in the presence of someone who formally refuses to follow them onto this terrain, and the astonishment mixed with spite, even with rage, that they experience upon realizing that all their argumentation falls into the void, something to which they can all the less resign themselves as they are obviously incapable of understanding the reasons for it.

We have even had dealings with people who claimed to oblige us to accord, to the little constructions of their own individual fantasy, an interest that we must reserve exclusively for traditional truths alone; we could naturally only oppose them with a refusal to entertain the matter, from which resulted fits of fury truly indescribable; then it is no longer only the sense of proportions that is lacking, it is also the sense of the ridiculous!

But let us return to more serious matters: since it is a question here of errors of perspective, we shall point out still another which, in truth, is of an entirely different order, for it occurs within the traditional domain itself; and it is, in sum, only a particular case of the difficulty that men generally have in admitting what goes beyond their own point of view.

That certain people, who are moreover the great majority, have their horizon limited to a single traditional form, or even to a certain aspect of that form, and are consequently enclosed in a point of view that could be called more or less narrowly "local," is something perfectly legitimate in itself, and indeed entirely inevitable; but what, on the other hand, is in no way acceptable is that they imagine that this same point of view, with all the limitations inherent in it, must equally be that of everyone without exception, including those who have become conscious of the essential unity of all traditions.

Against those, whoever they may be, who give proof of such an incomprehension, we must maintain, in the most unshakable manner, the rights of those who have risen to a higher level, from which the perspective is necessarily entirely different; that they bow before what they are, at least for the present, incapable of understanding themselves, and that they not meddle in anything that is not within their competence—this is, at bottom, all that we ask of them.

We willingly recognize, moreover, that as far as they are concerned, their limited point of view is not without certain advantages, first because it allows them intellectually to confine themselves to something

fairly simple and to be satisfied with it, and secondly because, by reason of the wholly “local” position in which they are confined, they are assuredly a nuisance to no one, which spares them from arousing against themselves hostile forces that they would probably be quite incapable of resisting.

THE HEART AND THE CAVE

We have already mentioned the close relationship between the symbolism of the cave and that of the heart, which explains the initiatic function of the cave as spiritual centre. In fact, the heart is essentially a symbol of the centre, whether it be the centre of a being or, analogously, of a world, that is, whether the standpoint be microcosmic or macrocosmic. It is therefore natural, given such a relationship, that the same meaning should be likewise attached to the cave; but that symbolic connection itself calls at this point for a fuller explanation.

The 'cave of the heart' is a well known traditional expression. The Sanskrit word guha generally designates a cave, but it is used also of the internal cavity ofthe heart, and consequently of the heart itself. This 'cave of the heart' is the vital centre in which resides not only jivatma but also unconditioned Atma, which in reality is identical with Brahma itself, as we have explained elsewhere.[1] The word guha is derived from the root guh, meaning 'to cover' or 'conceal' or 'hide', as does another similar root, gup, whence gupta which applies to everything of a secret character, everything that is not externally manifested. This is the equivalent of the Greek kruptos that gives the word 'crypt', which is synonymous with cave. These ideas are related to the centre insofar as it is considered as the most inward and consequently the most hidden point. At the same time, they refer also to the initiatic secret, either in itself or insofar as it is symbolised by the disposition of the place where the initiation is accomplished, a hidden or 'covered' place,[2] inaccessible to the profane, whether the access to it be barred by a 'labyrinthine' structure or in any other way (as for example, the 'temples without doors' of Far Eastern initiation), and always regarded as an image of the centre.

On the other hand, it is to be noted that this hiddenness or secrecy which

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1 Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta, ch. 3 (see Chandogya Upanishad, III,: 14, 3 and VIII 1, I.)

2 Cf., the Masonic expression, étre à couvert, to be under cover, to be safe.

characterises spiritual centres or their figurative representation implies that the traditional truth itself is no longer accessible in all its fullness to all men equally, which is the sign of a period of 'obscuration', at least in a relative sense. This makes it possible to 'place' such a symbolism in the course of the march of the cyclic process; but that is a point to which we shall have to come back to more fully in studying the relationships between the mountain and the cave, insofar as both are taken as symbols of the centre. For the moment we will simply point out in this respect that the diagram of the heart is a down-pointing triangle (the 'triangle of the heart' is yet another traditional expression); and this same figure also stands for the cave, whereas the mountain, or the pyramid which is its equivalent, is figured on the contrary by an up-pointing triangle; this shows that we have here a relationship that is inverse, and also in a certain sense complementary. Let us add, on the subject of this representation of the heart and the cave by an inverted triangle, that here is one of those cases in which clearly no idea of 'black magic' is involved, despite the all too frequent assertions of those whose knowledge of symbolism. is totally insufficient.

Let us now return to what is hidden, according to the Hindu tradition, in the 'cave of the heart'[3]: it is the principle of the being, which, in this state of envelopment and with regard to manifestation, is compared to what is smallest (the word dahara, which denotes the cavity where it resides, also refers to this same notion of smallness), while in reality it is what is greatest, just as the point is spatially infinitesimal and even null, although it is the principle by which all space is produced, or again, just as the number one appears as the smallest of numbers, although it contains them all principially, and produces from itself all their unending series. So here again we find the expression of an inverse relationship, inasmuch as the principle is considered according to two different points of view; of these, the point of view of extreme smallness concerns the principle's hidden and as it were 'invisible' state which, for the being in question, is as yet only a 'virtuality', but which will be the starting point of its spiritual development; there indeed lies the beginning (initium) of this development, which is directly related to

3 Katha Upanishad 1: 14.

initiation in the etymological sense of this term; and it is precisely from this point of view that the cave can be considered as the place of the 'second birth'. In this respect, we find texts such as the following: 'Know that this Agni, who is the foundation of the eternal (principial) world, and through whom that world can be attained, is hidden in the cave (of the heart)',> which in the microcosmic order refers to the 'second birth'; and also, by transposition into the macrocosmic order, it refers to its analogue, which is the birth of the Avatara.

It has already been mentioned that what resides in the heart is both jivatma from the standpoint of individual manifestation, and unconditioned Atma or Paramatma from the principial point of view; the distinction between individual and principle is no more than an illusory one; it only exists with regard to manifestation, but they are one in absolute reality. These are the 'two who have entered into the cave' and who at the same time are also said to 'dwell on the highest summit', so that the two symbolisms of the cave and the mountain are here reunited.[4] The text adds that 'those who know Brahma call them darkness and light'; this refers especially to the symbolism of 'Nara-narayana of which we have spoken in connection with the Atma-Gita, quoting this very same text: Nara, the human or mortal who is Jivatma, is identified with Arjuna; and Narayana, the divine or the immortal, which is Paramatma, is identifled with Krishna. Now, according to their literal meanings, the name Krishna denotes darkness of hue and that of Arjuna lightness, or, respectively, night and day, inasmuch as they are considered as representing the unmanifested and the manifested.[5] An exactly similar symbolism in this respect is that of the Dioscuri in their relationship with the two hemispheres, one dark and the other light, as we have indicated in connection with the meaning of the 'double spiral'[6] On the other hand, these 'two' that is, jivatma and Paramatma, are also the 'two birds' which appear in other texts as 'abiding on the same tree" (just as Arjuna and Krishna are mounted in the same chariot), and who

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4 Katha Upanishad III, 1; cf Brahma Sütras 1: 2, 11-12.

5 Cf., A. K. Coomaraswamy, "The Darker Side of the Dawn' [Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 94, 1] and 'Angel and Titan, an Essay in Vedic Ontology' [Journal of the American Oriental Society, 55, 373-419].

6 The Great Triad, Ch. 5.

are said to be ‘inseparably united’ because, as we said above, they are really one, the distinction between them being no more than illusory.[7] It must be noted here that the symbolism of the tree is essentially ‘axial’, like that of the mountain; and the cave, inasmuch as it is considered as situated under the mountain or within it, is also on the axis, where in any case, whatever the point of view, the centre must always be, for it is in the centre that the individual is united with the Universal.

Before leaving this subject, there is a point of language to be considered, the importance of which should not be overestimated, but which is curious nevertheless. The Egyptian word hor, which is the name of Horus, seems to mean heart. Horus would thus be the ‘Heart of the World’, according to a designation that is to be found in most traditions and which is in perfect keeping with his symbolism as a whole, insofar as that can be determined. It might be tempting, at first sight, to connect this word hor with cor, the Latin name for heart, the more so in that in the different languages the similar roots which denote the heart are to be found with either the aspirate or the guttural as initial letter: thus, on the one hand, hrid or hridaya in Sanskrit, heart in English, herz in German, and on the other, ker or kardion in Greek, and cor itself (genitive cordis) in Latin. But the common root of all these words, including the last mentioned, is in reality HRD or KRD, which can scarcely be the case with the word hor, so that here it would be not a question of the same root but only of a sort of phonetic convergence, which is none the less striking. There is however something that is perhaps more remarkable and in any case directly related to our subject: in Hebrew, the word hor or hur, written with the letter heth, signifies cave; this does not necessarily mean that there is an etymological link between these Hebrew and Egyptian words, although strictly speaking they may have a more or less remote common origin, but however that may be, their resemblance is none the less of considerable interest, seeing that there can be no such thing as pure chance. Nor is this all: in Hebrew, hor or har, written this time with the letter hz, signifles mountain; now since heth is, among aspirates, a reinforcement or hardening of he, as it were a compression, and since heth moreover expresses in itself,

7 Mundaka Upanishad III:1: Svetasvatara Upanishad IV, 6

ideographically, a notion of limit or enclosure, we see that the very relationship between the two words denotes the cave as being the place enclosed within the mountain, as indeed it is, literally as well as symbolically; and this brings us back yet again to the relationships between the mountain and the cave, which we must examine now in more detail.